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# Discriminating Utopian from Dystopian Literature: Why is *Walden Two* Considered a Dystopia?

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Skinner thought of *Walden Two* as a utopia, but many literary critics consider it a dystopia. The present paper examines works by several authors of utopian literature in an effort to determine what elements lead critics to classify works as "dystopian." Common elements seem to include (a) suspicion of scientific social planning, (b) the unhappiness of the characters portrayed, (c) suspicion of sources of control of behavior outside the individual, (d) violation of a presumed inherent need to struggle, and (e) suspicion of behavioral methods of governance. The elements *Walden Two* shares with other utopias and dystopias are examined, and the conclusion is offered that *Walden Two* could not be considered a dystopia for any of the traditional reasons. Instead, the negative view of *Walden Two* seems to be an outgrowth of literary devices and general negative reactions to behavioral determinism.

*Key words:* B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two,* utopia, dystopia

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The term *utopia* was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 from the Greek words for "no" and "place." Since that time, the term has served as the name for a genre of fiction that describes societies deemed to be either nearly perfect or nearly perfectly horrible. The terms *dystopia* or *antiutopia* have sometimes been used to characterize the latter (e.g., Kateb, 1963).

*Walden Two* is interesting from a literary standpoint in that many non-behavior analysts did not believe Skinner was being serious when he wrote his novel; they believed that he was in fact being satirical and presenting a dystopia. Negley and Patrick (1952) originally thought as much. When they realized Skinner's true intent, they denied the work entry into their summary of utopias. They also referred to the children of *Walden Two* as "little guinea pigs" and spoke of the novel's "nauseating conclusion" (p. 590).

Of course, many authors intended their novels to be either utopias or dystopias but have been faced with critics who have often considered them otherwise (Kumar, 1991). The fact that *Walden Two* was regarded as a utopia by its author but as a dystopia by critics (e.g., Krutch, 1954; Matson, 1976; Stevick, 1968; Walsh, 1962) does not make Skinner's work unique. Nonetheless, *Walden Two* seems to have inspired fiercer objections than any other modern utopian novel. For example, in his description of *Walden Two,* Frye (1965) stated that "its Philistine vulgarity makes it a caricature of the pedantry of social science" (p. 32).

Critics of utopian and dystopian literature (e.g., Davis, 1981; Kateb, 1963; Kumar, 1987; Walsh, 1962) have identified several elements that lead to the classification of a given work as dystopian. These elements include (a) suspicion of scientific social planning, (b) the unhappiness of the characters portrayed, (c) suspicion of sources of control of behavior outside the individual, (d) violation of a presumed inherent need to struggle, and (e) suspicion of behavioral methods of governance. This paper argues that these elements do not provide an adequate basis for classifying dystopias in general, and for classifying *Walden Two* as a dystopia in particular. The negative reaction to *Walden Two* seems instead to be due to Skinner's literary devices and to general negative reactions to

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the deterministic assumptions of behavior analysis.

## SUSPICION OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIAL PLANNING

Scientific social planning, of course, presupposes an orderliness to behavior that we call behavioral determinism. This idea is incongruent with viewpoints ranging from Christian theology to "third force" humanism. Describing objections from the religious side, Stevick (1968) satirized Frazier of *Walden Two* and wrote, "The Church is a community which must affirm freedom 'or its program would be absurd'" (p. 10). Third force humanists such as Matson (1976) also find behavioral determinism unacceptable: "There is so much that is wrong with this behaviorist panacea—so much that is patently silly and morally irresponsible . . ." (p. 119).

Skinner's work has not been alone in evoking such reactions. The utopian novels of H. G. Wells, also based upon scientific social planning, received similar responses (Kumar, 1991). E. M. Forster (1928/1964) wrote the dystopia *The Machine Stops* as "a counterblast to one of the heavens of H. G. Wells" (quoted in Shusterman, 1965, p. 51). The dystopian novels *Brave New World, We,* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were also written as direct reactions to Wellsian utopian novels (Kumar, 1987).

Wells and Skinner are alike in other ways. For example, they share the view that not to act does not avoid control of behavior, but merely leaves control to other sources (e.g., Skinner, 1971). The supposed noninfluence of "neutral" stances is illusory (e.g., Wells, 1905/1967):

> A state powerful enough to keep isolated under modern conditions would be powerful enough to rule the world, would be, indeed, if not actively ruling, yet passively acquiescent in all other human organizations, and so responsible for them altogether. (p. 12)

Taking their lead from Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1980), both Wells and Skinner seek to describe societies in which science forms the basis of public policy. Democracy, considered by Wells (1923) to be the leading of credulous and ignorant masses by energetic and unscrupulous individuals, has been abandoned in these utopian visions. Instead, experts in particular disciplines make decisions regarding policy in that area, subject to open criticism. Policies are carried out because it is clear that they will lead to maximum long-term reinforcement. If they do not, the policies or the planners are changed.

These Comtean expert-governed societies make many uneasy (e.g., Burgess, 1978), and they inspired some of the dystopian novels under consideration. Many critics fear that such utopias may make individuality a thing of the past—an intolerable loss (Kateb, 1963). Mumford (1965) sums up the issue as follows: "The sugared concept of scientific control, which B. F. Skinner insinuates into his *Walden Two,* is another name for arrested development" (p. 10). Frye (1965) notes that the work shows the "infantilism of specialists who see society merely as an extension of their own specialty" (p. 32).

Nonetheless, the use of science in the design of a society, or a society attempting to live up to the ideal of science, need not lead to the novel being called a dystopia. Huxley's *Island* (1962/1989) was designed in this manner, and is generally considered a utopian novel (Richter, 1971). The same could be said for *New Atlantis,* Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602/1885), and other visions that are generally considered utopian (Berneri, 1969; Eurich, 1967). It seems that the use of science as a means of social design is not enough to create a dystopia.

One of the factors that most readily accounts for the controversy surrounding Skinner's vision of utopia is its seeming proximity and possibility. As stated by Skinner (1979),

> *Walden Two* was not an escape to a distant island, to a "No-where," or to a future time. As Frazier said, it differed from the classical utopias precisely because it was to be found (and could be believed in) here and now. (p. 349)

Other novels were set on a different planet (e.g., Wells's *A Modern Utopia*), on the moon (e.g., Wells's *The First Men in the*

*Moon*), in a distant land (e.g., Bacon's *New Atlantis,* More's *Utopia,* Huxley's *Island*), in another dimension (e.g., Wells's *Men Like Gods*), or at some future time (e.g., Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*; Forster's *The Machine Stops*; Huxley's *Brave New World*; Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; Rand's *Anthem*; Wells's *The Time Machine, The World Set Free,* and *The Dream*; Zamiatin's *We*). *Walden Two,* however, could be enacted here and now, and numerous experiments have already shown the power of the behavior-analytic system upon which Skinner's utopia is based. The existence of communities inspired by Skinner's vision (e.g., Communidad Los Horcones, 1989) helps to make the "fears" very real. Proximity and possibility may not be enough to explain the reaction to *Walden Two,* however. Communal arrangements based upon *Looking Backward,* for example, have also been attempted (Richter, 1971), largely without hostility from critics.

Although other utopian visions have spawned real communal experiments, none have had as their basis the "dehumanizing" behavior-analytic base of *Walden Two.* As Skinner predicted in the pages of *Walden Two* itself, this experimental basis upsets the critic (as can be seen in the dialogue given to Castle in *Walden Two*). The ends of the *Walden Two* social experiments certainly do not cause anxiety in the critic. *Walden Two* is a utopia of means, with the ends being somewhat standard, occasionally even cliche, in the genre of utopian literature (Kumar, 1987). The hostility to *Walden Two* therefore seems to be a reaction to its means, and can be interpreted as an example of a more general reaction to Skinner and the experimental analysis of behavior.

On the whole, these reactions have been less than positive. This fact can be clearly seen in utopian novels (Newman, 1991), some of which specifically warn against state control by behavioral technology (e.g., *Brave New World* and *A Clockwork Orange*). That these reactions appear in this form is not unexpected, given that the original 20th century champion of behaviorism (Watson, 1924/1970) was quite frank in stating his belief that applied behaviorism could lead to a utopia:

> I am trying to dangle a stimulus in front of you, a verbal stimulus which, if acted upon, will gradually change this universe. For this universe will change if you bring up your children, not in the freedom of the libertine, but in behavioristic freedom. . . . Will not these children, in turn, with their better ways of living and thinking, replace us as society and in turn bring up their children in a still more scientific way, until the world finally becomes a place fit for human habitation? (pp. 303–304)

The ideas of Watson and Skinner presented in a nonfictional format inspired hostility and misunderstanding. The portrayal of scientific planning of society in a fictional format should be expected to do no less.

## UNHAPPINESS OF THE CHARACTER PORTRAYED

Trepidation regarding the scientific planning of society aside, to regard *Walden Two* as a dystopia seems strange. In *Walden Two,* "people are truly happy, secure, productive, creative, and forward-looking" (Skinner, 1986, p. 364). Nonetheless, critics (e.g., Negley & Patrick, 1952) of *Walden Two* have suggested that no sane individual could possibly be happy living in Frazier's community. Kateb (1963) expands the point to all utopias by quoting Alexander Gray: "No Utopia has ever been described in which any sane man would on any conditions consent to live, if he could possibly escape" (p. 15). Skinner (1971) responded to such objections as follows:

> The problem is to design a world which will be liked not by people as they now are but by those who live in it. "I wouldn't like it" is the complaint of the individualist who puts forth his own susceptibilities to reinforcement as established values. A world that would be liked by contemporary people would perpetuate the status quo. (p. 164)

This issue of the happiness of citizens can, perhaps, be avoided entirely. Happiness seems not to be a criterion in the designation of novels as utopian or dystopian. The residents of the acknowledged dystopia *Brave New World* are almost exclusively happy. The same could

be said of the residents of other dystopian novels such as *The Machine Stops, Fahrenheit 451,* and *We.* As expressed by the Savage in *Brave New World,* the key point of many dystopian novels is the inalienable "right to be unhappy."

## SUSPICION OF SOURCES OF BEHAVIORAL CONTROL OUTSIDE THE INDIVIDUAL

Several popular dystopias have had dictatorships as their basis of government. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is perhaps the finest and most chilling example of a dictatorial government. The societies of *We, Brave New World, Anthem,* and others also leave decision making in the hands of an elite minority. *A Clockwork Orange* warns us that when we allow behavior to be controlled by an elite minority, humanity has ceased to be. Davis (1981) agrees, and follows up by noting that "man as a moral agent" (p. 387) may be destroyed under such systems. The society of *Walden Two* is mistakenly considered to be a dictatorship by critics (e.g., Krutch, 1954; Matson, 1976), largely because the deterministic basis of its system emphasizes sources of control of behavior that are outside the individual.

*Walden Two* does have planners and managers who structure the environment in order to shape behavior. Yet, this arrangement is not unknown in utopian works. Plato's *Republic* had its guardian class. *A Modern Utopia* (Wells, 1905/1967) had its semimonastic samurai class, which was later seen to have dissolved by the time of *Men Like Gods,* so that nearly all people became part of the samurai class. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* features (equally paid) hierarchical ranks within an "industrial army." The societies described in these novels seem to function rather well, and quite apart from any contact with, or fear of, this "guardian dictatorship." The societies are structured such that interactions lead to mutual positive reinforcement, and the need for other sources of governance or laws is minimal. *Men Like Gods, Looking Backward, The Dream,* and *Utopia* are all excellent examples of such arrangements, and are descriptions of how environments shape the behavior of individuals. *Island* was Huxley's final acceptance of, and eloquent praise for, this basic behavioral idea. If planners or managers set society into motion, it is the everyday positive interactions and not the actions of some outside agency that keep it going. The fact that there is a planner, or that the sources of control of behavior are assumed to be within the individual's interactions with the environment, does not automatically qualify a work as dystopian.

## VIOLATION OF HUMANITY'S PRESUMED NEED TO STRUGGLE

Taking their lead from Plato's *Republic,* many utopian and dystopian novels have used a dialogue as the primary means of presenting ideas. Seemingly inevitably, a verbal clash between a proponent of the social order and a dissident comes to the front. These discussions often center around the idea of the inherent need of humanity to struggle, to rise up to a challenge, and to face adversity. Without such challenges to conquer, life becomes hollow and meaningless (Kateb, 1963). In *Brave New World,* the discussants are the Savage and Mustapha Mond. In *The Machine Stops,* the clash is between son and mother. In *Walden Two,* it is between Castle and Frazier. In *Men Like Gods,* it is between Catskill and Urthred the Utopian. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* the debate is between Winston and O'Brien. In *The Wanting Seed,* the discussion is between Tristam and Major Berkely.

As much as anything else, these discussions allow us to see whether a novel was intended to be utopian or dystopian. Who wins these debates sets up the novel as utopian or dystopian. Unfortunately for the sake of classification, the author's choice and the reader's choice as to who wins the argument may be entirely different. The reasoning and history that led an author to his or her utopian or dystopian vision may be totally lost on oth-

ers. Twin Oaks cofounder Kathleen Kinkade (1973) provides an example: "We had read *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and were not impressed. The writing is great, the logic downright silly" (p. 148).

Similarly, claiming that Skinner's system would eliminate the need for humanity to struggle (as suggested by Burgess, 1973) might be considered "downright silly." A society based upon experimentation holds as a basic principle that not all ideas will lead to their desired ends. If every idea was successful, there would be no need for experimentation. For better or worse, frustation and struggle would not be eliminated from *Walden Two*; thus, the need of humanity to struggle would remain intact.

## SUSPICION OF BEHAVIORAL METHODS OF GOVERNANCE

One of the main arguments of antiutopians is that utopias are not desirable because there is no way to attain or maintain a utopia without sacrificing the principles behind the utopian vision (Kateb, 1963). As mentioned above, regardless of Skinner's intentions, *Walden Two* is feared partially because of a belief that the Skinnerian system would inevitably lead to a dictatorship. This fear can be traced, in no small part, to misunderstandings regarding Skinner's use of the term "freedom." Matson (1976), for example, has said that Skinner's political system would be oppressive: "there is no place for the idea of freedom . . . within the system of scientific behaviorism" (p. 121). Sir Karl Popper made his objections concrete. He refused to sign *The Humanist Manifesto Two* because Skinner, "an enemy of freedom and democracy," had already signed (see *Free Inquiry, 1*(2), pp. 3–4 for Popper's sentiments and Skinner's reply, and *Free Inquiry, 1* (3), pp. 3–4 for Anthony Flew's and Sidney Hook's additional objections to Skinner's involvement in the humanist movement). Skinner's view of freedom, as well as his emphasis on positive reinforcement in lieu of coercion, is well known to behavior analysts. Skinner would create a society in which positive reinforcement would be available for constructive behavior. Sir Thomas More, in *Utopia,* suggested the same thing. It is interesting to note that few critics have described how More wanted to limit freedom.

Aldous Huxley provides an interesting twist on the issue of whether behavioral methods of governance are inherently dystopian. *Brave New World* portrayed behavioral interventions in their poorest light, whereas *Brave New World Revisited* mentioned *Walden Two* as a possible solution to problems pushing society towards Huxley's feared dystopia. Finally, in his last novel, *Island,* Huxley portrayed a society that used the same sciences as his behavioral dystopia, but for entirely humanistic ends (Baker, 1990; Newman, 1992; Watt, 1974). Kumar (1991) summed up the historical progression:

> In 1948 B. F. Skinner gleefully turned the tables on Huxley by employing many of the devices of *Brave New World* in his utopia of behavioral engineering, *Walden Two.* The example must have been infectious, for Huxley also later reversed himself. In his utopia, *Island* (1962/1989), he attempted to dispel some of the gloom he had created by showing how *Brave New World* practices could be deployed in a positive way. (p. 47)

We thus come to a crucial point. *Walden Two* provoked far fiercer reactions than did *Island,* which is generally considered utopian. Yet, both societies used the same sciences, relying on the same behavioral interventions that many fear. As mentioned above, the use of behavioral methods of governance per se does not automatically classify a work as a dystopia.

## WHY IS *WALDEN TWO* STILL CONSIDERED A DYSTOPIA?

Although all of the traditional suggestions as to why a novel might be considered dystopian have been applied to *Walden Two* by its critics, none of these reasons is sufficient. The reactions to *Walden Two* instead seem to have arisen from the absence of traditional literary devices and, more important, a general

philosophical objection to behavioral determinism.

*Literary Devices*

How then, should we explain the fact that *Walden Two,* in contrast to other similar novels, is still considered a dystopia? Perhaps the reason for this seeming paradox rests in literary distractions, a "cushioning of the blow," with the scientific elements being obscured by more philosophical ones. *New Atlantis* featured the new humanist philosophy. *City of the Sun* was a Christian work. *Island,* as will be discussed below, was based largely on Eastern philosophy. Skinner's vision had no such distractions from its scientific basis. The fact that Wells's novels, which also contained no distractions from their scientific basis, are also considered dystopias by many of the same critics who consider *Walden Two* a dystopia lends support to this notion.

Huxley apparently guessed that threatening many social institutions (e.g., eliminating the nuclear family, practicing selective breeding, and advocating the use of hallucinogens) in his novel would provoke hostility towards the residents of the *Island.* Huxley thus wisely made his characters sympathetic from the beginning, advocates of his "perennial philosophy." The Palanese residents of the *Island* are portrayed as the pacifistic underdogs, an endangered species. They are a simple people, using the best of laboratory science and Eastern enlightenment to provide the greatest opportunities for individual self-actualization. They have not opted for a consumer culture, despite considerable resources. They seek to live their lives simply, advance their culture (spiritually, not materialistically), and change the world by example. If they cannot change the world by example, they seek to be left alone. Nevertheless, the Palanese know that they will not be left alone. They are beset from all sides, and by the end of the novel their way of life is ended and their homeland invaded.

Huxley's vision is strikingly similar to Skinner's earlier vision. Both societies avoided central government as a solution to society's problems. Both are societies in which consumerism has not taken hold and in which behavioral science is employed to allow each individual to live life to the fullest in a relatively simple fashion.

Skinner created a society that simply asked "to be left alone" (pp. 195–196). As mentioned above, Huxley did the same in *Island.* In contrast to Huxley's vision, however, this request is not violated in *Walden Two.* Had Skinner set up *Walden Two* as a battleground on which a peaceful people were overcome by a neighboring bully and Frazier turned into a martyr, the novel's reception may very well have been different. Readers need feel no sympathy for the residents of *Walden Two.* Rather, it is made clear that the residents should feel sorry for the rest of us. By failing to make the residents of *Walden Two,* particularly Frazier, appear to be victims, Skinner failed to provoke the crucial sympathy required of the reader.

The *Island* residents did indeed rely on a science of behavior in the creation of their society. In contrast to Skinner's agnostic vision, however, Huxley's novel described a society that combined science with Eastern mysticism. The Palanese created a culture in which "elementary ecology leads straight to elementary Buddhism" (pp. 219–220). The image that emerges is of an enlightened people, not of a society of "little guinea pigs." *Walden Two* did not have the metaphysical base of *Island.* Without the metaphysics and without the enlightenment (the cushioning of the blow), all one is left with is the determinism that offends many individuals. This determinism, when combined with the lack of sympathy for its residents, leaves *Walden Two* designated as a dystopia.

*Determinism*

Determinism as a philosophy of human behavior lacks appeal for a variety of reasons. Such a view is regarded as unpleasant or threatening to the "humanity" of the individual, much as evolutionary theory is considered by some

to be unpleasant or a threat. Stevick (1968) illustrates the point: "A reader might well conclude that, for all his humanitarianism, Skinner just does not like people very well" (p. 16) and "The most precious thing about man is his humanity. *Walden Two* commends its deliberate abandonment" (p. 28).

Sentiments such as Stevick's are largely a product of the misconception that the deterministic view of human behavior is incompatible with a view of the human as inventor. For example, Stevick (1968) has said that Skinner could not, according to his own theory, create a new society: "If man were only the product of external forces, one supposes that nothing new, fresh, and creative [such as *Walden Two*—Skinner's novel or Frazier's community] could emerge in human culture" (p. 24). Matson (1976) expands on the objection: "If Skinner is correct in his deterministic assumptions, then his argument is superfluous and futile. . . . If we can act upon the environment and initiate behavioral technologies—Skinner is thoroughly refuted in his basic premises" (p. 123). Thus the concern with determinism continues.

Kumar (1987) describes the concern of the humanist:

> It is here that the general humanist critique is most uneasily and most insecurely on the defensive. It seems concerned to preserve a "sacred" area of human life and consciousness from the scrutiny of science. Certain cherished human values—free will, spontaneity, creativity—seem threatened by the scientific approach to human behavior. There appears to be an anxiety that perhaps man will after all turn out not to have the god-like attributes postulated of him. (p. 369)

Skinner apparently did not want to include distractions from the deterministic basis of his utopian vision, distractions that may well have led to a warmer reception for the novel. As with much of Skinner's other work, *Walden Two* was apparently meant to challenge the reader to deal with its arguments head-on.

Behavior analysts were not the first to suggest that behavior is determined, and they surely will not be the last. Indeed, this deterministic assumption is contained within most utopian novels, whether the author intended it or not. Even novels that were written to glorify human freedom (e.g., *We, The Wanting Seed, Brave New World*) describe deterministic systems. If the environment could not shape the behavior of the individual, then why would we find ideal individuals within the ideal societies, or corrupt individuals within the corrupt societies? Utopianism would be pointless without determinism. Skinner's novel does what the others do not: It forces us to examine this issue without distractions. It is small wonder that most would rather condemn *Walden Two* than praise it.

Utopian novels, by nature, often question the existing social order. Because they are controversial, many utopian novels have been published under pseudonyms (Kumar, 1991) or their authors subtly disguised their ideas. *Walden Two* unquestionably challenges some of society's most cherished notions. If *Walden Two* is considered a dystopia for this reason, then the label "dystopia" should be worn proudly and should be shared by some of the best work of the genre.

## CONCLUSION

The history of utopian literature has been one of utopia suggested and dystopia answered. Ideas presented as utopian have almost universally been turned around and presented as dystopian. Aristophanes counters Plato's image. Bacon is countered by Swift. Wells is countered by Huxley, Forster, and Zamiatin. Bellamy is countered by Morris. Skinner is countered by Huxley and Burgess (although later supported by Huxley). It seems that no one has yet described a social order that all could agree is utopian. The negative reaction to *Walden Two,* although occasionally infuriating, should thus not be unexpected.

Some authors (e.g., Bellamy) of utopian novels have lamented that the solutions for the problems confronting society are often at hand, if only they would be used. Behaviorists have expressed the same sentiment, as have the characters

in the utopian novels themselves (e.g., Equality 7-2521, protagonist of *Anthem,* when he tried to reintroduce the electric light into a candle-using society). *Walden Two* can be read as a suggestion to use the science of behavior analysis to solve some of society's most pressing problems. Before the suggestion is heeded, however, the philosophical objections to the behavioral system must first be dispelled.

The key question of how to change the reception of *Walden Two,* and, more generally, the reception of behavior analysis, comes down to how to cushion the blow of behavioral determinism. This issue has, of course, inspired considerable speculation by behavior analysts. Bailey (1991), for example, suggested emphasizing the ability of the science to build personal autonomy—"freedom and dignity." This suggestion is particularly attractive, because it emphasizes "empowering" the individual and brings about the very autonomy that is supposedly destroyed by the behavioral system. Another suggestion might be to emphasize the fact that behavior analysis is only a science, and, as such, requires an outside philosophy to guide its applications. This would take the discussion away from the morality of behavior analysis itself and into the more useful realm of the appropriate ends for the science. A third alternative would be to emphasize the teaching of self-management skills. This would help to eliminate fears of behavior analysis as manipulation from without. However it is accomplished, it seems that the ability of the science of behavior analysis to promote autonomy and fulfillment for the individual must be emphasized and accepted before its more unsettling philosophical implications will be grudgingly accepted and the fears of dictatorship or dehumanization dispelled.

By examining views of behavior and behaviorism as expressed in utopian and dystopian novels, advocates of social planning based on scientific principles may be able to find ways to cushion the blow behavioral thinking may provide. This will then lead others to regard *Walden Two* as the utopia it was intended to be. Given the history of utopian literature, however, effecting such a change in perspective may not be an easy task. It is more likely that scientific utopians will learn that one cannot please everyone, that some insist on the right to be unhappy, and, most important, that challenging cherished ideas often leads to resistance.

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